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FROM AMBASSADOR TONY P. HALL, U.S. MISSION TO THE UN AGENCIES

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SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR TONY P. HALL VISITS GUATEMALA: CHRONIC  
MALNUTRITION WORSENER BY HURRICANE

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Summary  
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1. Six weeks after Hurricane Stan swept through Guatemala, I visited the country from November 12 to 15 to assess the food security situation and efforts to restore the nation's infrastructure. Damage to foodstocks and infrastructure has made emergency assistance challenging; reconstruction will be critical to both short and long-term assistance. Compounding the disaster is Guatemala's chronic malnutrition -- the highest in Latin America -- though the Government of Guatemala (GOG) appears committed to alleviating poverty. The damage caused by Stan will not only increase likelihood of hunger and poverty, but potential instability given the high level of crime and "conflictivity" in the border region, which suffered worse. Thus, the response to Stan provides an opportunity to reduce potential instability in this border area, as well as to increase our goodwill and promote democracy through continued support and development of agriculture resources.

2. During my visit, I made it clear that the U.S. will continue to support food-insecure Guatemala, and assist in the rebuilding of the nation's infrastructure. In Guatemala City, I announced an additional U.S. donation of \$2 million towards the GOG's World Food Program (WFP) emergency request of \$22 million.

3. We should encourage greater coordination among the UN and NGO communities and with the government in order to avoid overlap and poor use of resources; and extol the leadership from USAID in its relationship with the GOG in assisting with this coordination. We must also emphasize to the donor community that the worst hit regions of the country will face a long and difficult winter if food aid doesn't arrive soon. We must urge other donors to join us in meeting WFP's appeal.

END SUMMARY.

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Economic and Social Impact  
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4. Accompanied by Public Affairs Officer Carla Benini and Special Assistant David Austin, I spent three days in Guatemala to examine local conditions and assess the food security situation with the help of the local US Mission. We traveled to three departments, or provinces, within the country and met with several communities affected by food insecurity and malnutrition.

5. It was clear that Stan has had a frightening impact on the forecasted harvest for November, nearly wiping out the maize, beans and rice crops in certain areas. The GOG predicts that up to 1.5 million people will need food assistance through the next harvest in 2006. Even prior to the hurricane, over 50% of the children of Guatemala were chronically malnourished (80% of the indigenous population), according to WFP data, representing the most severe chronic food crisis in Latin America. On November 10 the GOG made an emergency request to the WFP for an additional \$22 million in food aid; the US has committed over \$4 million in response to this request; 42% of the request has been fulfilled by the US and other donors.

6. In addition to losing the majority of their main crops, many people in the storm-affected areas also lost their land to the hurricane-triggered mudslides that roared through communities, carrying with them homes, crops, family members, and the arable land on which survivors would have been able to eke out a living. In a matter of hours, small creeks became wide rivers depositing large volumes of heavy mud and large boulders in the paths of the former creeks, where many impoverished communities had located. In some communities we visited over 50% of the homes were damaged or destroyed.

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What We Saw

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17. We traveled to the department of Chimaltenango with USAID Mission Director Glenn Anders to visit a USAID project called AGEXPRONT that has organized and trained 25 farming families in a farming cooperative, and that has resulted in a six-fold net increase to their incomes. This coop has reached out to another 125 families in order to supply Guatemala's McDonald's chain and Pais supermarkets. Additional income has built a school and children's health clinic.

18. We visited an impoverished community in Chimaltenango that had been severely affected by landslides and rain from Stan. NGO partner "SHARE" is offering assistance in partnership with USAID to provide P.L. 480 food commodities and funds for the reconstruction of water and sanitary infrastructures. While traveling through the department we saw hundreds of mudslides that had wiped out roads, bridges, and poor communities. Three Peace Corps Volunteers from Chimaltenango briefed us on the problems of malnutrition in their area that pre-dated Stan.

19. On November 14, my team and I traveled to the department of San Marcos, where we visited two sites hit by mudslides and met the local citizens who had lost their homes, families and/or land. As we flew to San Marcos from Guatemala City by helicopter we could easily see the extent of the damage to crops. In San Marcos we visited two food distribution sites, one GOG project, and one WFP site where US wheat and maize were being distributed in 50kg bags.

110. Prior to leaving the department of San Marcos we met with Bishop Alvaro Ramazzini, who is president of the Bishops' Secretariat of Central America and Panama and has spoken out

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against US trade policies. I spoke about America's history of generosity to the people of Guatemala our recent giving to Hurricane recovery and assistance, and mentioned US humanitarian assistance even to nations that have shown animosity towards the US, underscoring that US aid is meant to help people and not to influence policy.

111. On November 15 I traveled to Jutiapa with FAO country director Ian Charrett to visit two FAO agriculture technical development projects to alleviate severe poverty and increase nutrition through simple agriculture diversification. These programs are developed through the local village leaders and district mayors thereby strengthening grass roots democratic processes, successfully linking humanitarian assistance with democratic support.

112. Meetings with GOG officials in Rome and Guatemala City were encouraging. Minister Andres Botran, Secretary Hugo Beteta and Vice President Eduardo Barillas displayed an extraordinary commitment to the issues of hunger, poverty and agricultural development -- unmatched in my experience with developing nation governments. Further US investment in Guatemala - both for reconstruction as well as longer-term agricultural development -- would be money well spent.

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Press Coverage  
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112. US Mission Guatemala helped organize a press conference following our visit to San Marcos. About 30 journalists were present, including five television cameras. Represented media outlets included CNN Espanol, wire services and Guatemala's major dailies and weeklies. The delegation also hosted Reuters TV and the New York Times during field visits and conducted a phone interview with Cox News Service out of Mexico City.

113. Coverage was overwhelmingly positive in Guatemala and throughout Central America. Front-page headlines of increased US assistance were on three of the four major papers. Several papers used the story of additional US aid as a jumping off point for general think pieces on the hunger issue. We also heard there was pickup by BBC of the Reuters TV coverage.

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CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS  
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114. This visit focused primarily on food insecurity prior to and after Stan. Infrastructure development and a strategy for implementing within reconstruction a plan for diversified higher-valued agriculture, and its subsequent multiplying affects on the rural economy will be key components of a long-term solution to hunger in Guatemala.

115. There are currently many players assisting victims of Hurricane Stan. Improved coordination of aid will insure the proper amount and kind of assistance will reach the most needy recipients.

¶16. Local infrastructure is in need of repair if economic development is to progress to the point beyond subsistence agriculture. In addition to food assistance, a plan for bringing access to these communities is critical for their ability to improve their own destiny. FAO and USAID projects in Guatemala have shown that the farmers in this country can succeed when given training and access to markets.

¶17. The GOG should consider a focused campaign on improving girls' education. Improved school attendance among girls, especially within indigenous populations, would contribute to lowering malnutrition rates.

¶18. In the short term, so long as donors provide adequate, in-time assistance, the combination of existing GOG and related USAID, WFP, FAO, and NGO assistance efforts appear adequate to avert famine. US assistance to GOG (over \$250 million) has been critical to stabilizing civil society for the past five years, and the current government has shown their commitment to democratic principles and fighting hunger.

¶19. We should support the GOG's request to WFP and alert the donor community regarding any remediable shortfalls for the procurement and distribution of necessary food assistance for the coming 12 months.

BRAKEL